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Volte-face over 'Howard Doctrine' should help mend ties

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JOHN Howard took his time to answer the criticisms levelled at him by Asian leaders over the so-called "Howard Doctrine" where he had supposedly advocated the Australian government's new, interventionist foreign policy.

It took him a week after The Bulletin magazine had printed the interview where he was quoted as saying that the "Howard Doctrine" saw Australia acting in "a sort of deputy peacekeeping capacity" in the Asian region to the "global policeman" role of the US, to deny the contents of the article.

Despite the delay in responding to the issue, the time has come to accept the Australian Prime Minister's statement and begin the road to mend ties.

Just after Howard's Liberal-National coalition came to power in March 1996, one of its first foreign policy statements was that the new administration wants "to assure Asian countries about the Australian government's commitment to the region".

It accused the previous Labor administration of Paul Keating of creating "false impressions".

Except for some minor hiccups, Australia's relations with Asean have been good especially with Canberra playing a key role in discussions and negotiations in the Post Ministerial Conference and Asean Regional Forum to achieve success in implementing confidence building measures to ensure the region enjoys peace and stability.

Bilateral ties between Malaysia and Australia has also strengthened under Howard's leadership especially after the spat in 1993 when Keating had referred to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a "recalcitrant" when the Malaysian Prime Minister decided not to attend the Apec summit in Seattle called by US President Bill Clinton.

Dr Mahathir's stopover visit to Australia, on March 29, merely three weeks after Howard's win in the general election, was described as a diplomatic coup for the new Australian administration.

However, a 1988 comment by Howard that the rate of Asian immigration into Australia needed to be slowed has continued to haunt him even though he had apologised to the Asian community in Australia after winning the election that he was wrong to have made the remark.

When fish and chips trader and One Nation party chief, Pauline Hanson went on a crusade to freeze immigration since Australia risked being "swamped by Asians" and that benefits to the Aborigines be withdrawn, Howard was once again accused of being too slow to act.

This caused a major race debate in Australia and many Asian countries lambasted Australia for the extremist views that emerged from the debate.

Many analysts feel the issue would have been over sooner if Howard had acted quickly and "reprimanded" Hanson and also explained his country's stand on the issue to the world.

In the issues created by The Bulletin and Hanson, Howard's lack of swiftness in putting the issues to rest had resulted in strong verbal exchanges and criticisms which could have been avoided.

It is hoped that in delaying his reaction and creating long-running debates, the Australian politician had not deliberately planned to benefit politically on the local front.

A report from Canberra had said Howard's robust handling of the East Timor crisis may have been lambasted by Asian leaders, but at home his

popularity was rising.

It added that a poll published in The Australian on Tuesday showed that 56 per cent of voters were satisfied with Howard's performance as Prime Minister, up from the 50 per cent or so recorded in all the bi-weekly surveys since July.

Nick Economou, political scientist at Monash University in Melbourne, said the events in East Timor and Australia's handling of them were fuelling Howard's new-found popularity - at least domestically.

"These are great moments of nationalistic pride, the prime ministers are always out there trying to exploit them and so far the exercise seems to be going off without too many hitches," Economou added.

Howard, being a veteran politician and one who had many times stressed the need for good neighbourliness, should be taken for his word over those published by The Bulletin.

Being geographically close to Asia and with decades of strong ties with countries in this region, it is hoped that Australia would continue to nurture the close relations it had established with its neighbours.

Respecting the sovereignty and integrity of other nations and at the same time working in tandem with them to ensure symbiotic benefits has proven to be rewarding and this is a formula nations in this region should continue to uphold.

It is hoped that increased efforts are taken to heal wounds and wounded prides to enable nations and leaders to get back on track of their national and regional agenda - that is to live in harmony and help each other in times of crisis.

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